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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 ASHGABAT 000486

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SUBJECT: FOREIGN MINISTER MEREDOV ASKS FOR PRESIDENTIAL
VISIT, BUT NO OFFER ON OVERFLIGHTS

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Richard M. Miles.
Reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

¶1. (C) SUMMARY. On April 15, Assistant Secretary for South and Central Asia Richard Boucher discussed bilateral and regional issues with Turkmenistan Foreign Minister Rashid Meredov. The Turkmen would like to see President Berdimuhamedov visit the United States this November. Meredov asked for U.S. Government input on the draft closing statement for the upcoming energy transit security conference in Ashgabat and a possible convention on the security of energy transport. He answered the U.S. request for an increased number of military overflights to Afghanistan with concerns on "technical" grounds, not objections of principle, but would not immediately accept Boucher's proposal of a framework for resolution. Boucher urged greater progress on human rights. Meredov emphasized that resolving regional water issues requires greater respect for the interests of downstream countries like Turkmenistan. END SUMMARY.

MUTUAL DESIRE TO EXPAND RELATIONS

¶2. (C) On April 15, Assistant Secretary for South and Central Asia Richard Boucher met with Turkmenistan Foreign Minister Rashid Meredov. Referring to the day's earlier meeting with President Berdimuhamedov (septel), Foreign Minister Meredov said the President would like to develop Turkmenistan's relationship with the United States in political, economic, trade, including energy, and humanitarian spheres. Boucher replied that we'd seen President Berdimuhamedov emphasize a program for the country in areas of U.S. interest -- education, agriculture, energy and greater democracy and respect for human rights. We also appreciate Turkmenistan's regional role. The new administration is looking for ways to develop relations with Central Asian countries, supplementing government-to-government relations with greater engagement by companies, NGOs, assistance programs and universities.

TURKMEN WANT A PRESIDENTIAL VISIT TO U.S.

¶3. (C) FM Meredov commented on the U.S.-Turkmen bilateral political dialogue, noting past U.S. congressional delegations and visits by high-level U.S. officials. Now there's a need to "elevate the dialogue to a higher level," concretely in the form of a Berdimuhamedov visit to the

United States later this year, perhaps in November. He proposed that, if the Turkmen side knew in principle that such a visit was possible, it would start preparations. Boucher explained that, while there is support for such a visit in Washington, it wasn't yet possible to specify dates. Meredov said he would consider a trip to lay the groundwork for a subsequent presidential visit.

SEEKING INPUT ON ENERGY CONFERENCE STATEMENT

¶4. (C) Concerning the upcoming April 23-24 energy transit security conference in Ashgabat, the Foreign Minister noted active participation by State and Energy Department officials who will attend the event. He said the Turkmen Government had tried to prepare a flexible and relevant draft conference document that included Turkmenistan's vision for the event's final doctrine. He asked for U.S. input on the draft text prior to the conference in order to allow time to make revisions. Expanding on the Turkmen Government's desired outcome, Meredov hoped all participants would recognize the need for an effective mechanism to guarantee reliable shipment of energy resources. While it would be a long process, the final result could be the adoption of a UN convention on the subject that would address the needs of producers, transit countries, and consumers. He remarked that such a mechanism to address interruptions due to political factors or natural disasters is lacking, especially under the UN umbrella. If the conference participants support such an approach, the next step would be to ask the UN Secretariat to form a committee to work on the issue.

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Meredov asked for U.S. reaction to the idea in advance of next week's conference. The Assistant Secretary agreed that transit of energy resources must happen without interruption, which could best be achieved by diversification of export routes. The final form of any such document on energy transit security, whether a convention, declaration, or something else, would be a question for lawyers to resolve.

U.S. LECTURER SOUGHT FOR INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS INSTITUTE

¶5. (C) Regarding areas for further bilateral cooperation, Foreign Minister Meredov urged greater engagement in education and science. He mentioned as an example the cooperation between University of Nevada-Reno and the State Agricultural University. Highlighting the Foreign Ministry's newly-created Institute for International Relations, he said retired U.S. diplomats or other relevant foreign policy experts would be welcome to lecture there. He also invited academic exchanges for the Institute's students.

THE OVERFLIGHT ISSUE

¶6. (C) Boucher explained the recent Afghan strategy review and our desire to cooperate more closely with countries in the region. One way for Turkmenistan to contribute would be to allow increased U.S. overflights. The Assistant Secretary explained that, as U.S. activity expands in Afghanistan, 1600 flights per year will not meet our needs and we would like either to increase the number of flights or remove the ceiling completely. Concerning payment for overflights, the United States has a blanket policy not to pay such fees. However, U.S. flights provide other financial benefits through landing fees, fuel purchases, and equipment and technical assistance. The Assistant Secretary suggested that we could agree to a general framework to resolve these issues (lift the cap and set aside the overflight charges and we'll ensure a smooth flow of benefits and support).

¶7. (C) Meredov said the Turkmen would consider this proposal, but that on the issue of the number of overflights, speaking frankly, Turkmen airspace is very busy and the agency responsible for air traffic control wanted a reduced number of flights, citing concern about pollution and saying it had reached its technical limits. This involved not just U.S.

flights, but all aircraft, noting that there is a maximum number that is not technically possible to exceed. U.S. flights are calculated as part of total overflight capacity: an increase in U.S. flights would require a decrease in other flights, which would not be easy. This position does not mean that Turkmenistan refuses to help, but technical reasons for the limits would be hard to change. The United States is the only country to have been granted blanket overflight clearance and has been operating with the 1600 flight annual ceiling since 2001.

18. (C) Boucher emphasized the need to prevent the Taliban from returning to power, and for the U.S. and Turkmenistan to help each other in this situation. The United States is expanding its efforts in Afghanistan and looking for ways to diversify its supply lines. Other Central Asian countries have concluded transit agreements, and increasing flights through Turkmenistan would be a contribution to this effort. Increased refueling at Ashgabat airport would generate more revenue for the airport. If the issue was defining the technical parameters of the number of overflights, the Assistant Secretary suggested that the two sides agree to lift the cap or identify an increased figure, and then let the technical experts work out a practical solution. If Turkmen aviation experts moved forward, they would see a benefit from this activity and a way for the United States to increase its overflights. Meredov said it should not be a problem for U.S. and Turkmen technical experts to meet, and that the Turkmen side would consider it, but that Turkmen aviation experts were not prepared to offer more flights.

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LAGGING ON PROGRESS IN HUMAN RIGHTS

19. (C) In the area of human rights, the Assistant Secretary indicated that the United States would like to see greater progress on human rights issues. In areas such as cooperation with the International Committee of the Red Cross on allowing prison visits, or with other human rights organizations, increased engagement was needed. While there has been progress on legislative reform, the United States wants to see more forward progress and momentum. The Foreign Minister defended the Turkmen Government's human rights record, citing its consistent approach to implementing reforms and its active cooperation with the UN in the human rights sphere. Concerning the Red Cross in particular, he said he had proposed a confidence building process that would proceed in stages involving training for law enforcement and judicial officials, general inspections of prison conditions, and eventually meetings with individual prisoners.

TURKMEN POLICY ON WATER AND ENERGY

110. (C) Meredov wanted to clearly state Turkmenistan's policy regarding Central Asia's water and hydroelectric energy resources. Turkmenistan supports a solution that considers all Central Asian countries, according to international norms as provided in three UN conventions on the regulation of transborder water resources. The Turkmen want the issue resolved with the participation of international organizations. If an upstream country plans to build a hydroelectric project, there should first be international expertise to evaluate the project in the interest of openness and complete information. As a country located downstream on the region's major rivers, the Foreign Minister urged that its interests should be taken into account, or else water could be blocked in the upper reaches. He rejected, however, the creation of a regional structure to resolve the issue, saying there only needed to be a mechanism for regular meetings of the Central Asian states, perhaps with the involvement of the UN Regional Center for Preventive Diplomacy. The Assistant Secretary outlined U.S. policy on this issue: assistance to Central Asian countries to promote better water resource management and support for diplomatic efforts to resolve the matter on a regional basis.

11. (U) This cable was cleared by Assistant Secretary Boucher.
MILES